

## SELLING THE LIBERAL MEDIA CONSERVATIVE IDEAS, OR HOW TO WORK WITH RATHER THAN OVER THE MEDIA

By Hugh C. Newton

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*Mr. Newton delivered this presentation at Hillsdale during the Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "The Media: Recorders or Makers of the News?"*

Thomas Jefferson once wrote to James Madison: "The people are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty." That maxim does not, of course, apply if "the people" is equated with "the mob." But it does have a great deal of meaning for those of us - public relations practitioners, lobbyists, academics and public policy activists - who are concerned with philosophical issues - today's causes.

Unfortunately, while Jefferson was right, one cannot always rely on the people to get the necessary information with which to save themselves - and that is where constructive public relations comes into play. Madison, agreeing with Jefferson, said, "A popular government without popular information or a means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy, or perhaps both." Modern day conservative activists are prone to say that the farce and tragedy of our present government is the result of a media that simply does not provide the people with the information necessary to change the direction of our government, now subject to double digit inflation, an increasing dependence on oil from the politically unstable Middle East, the passing of strategic nuclear superiority from the



United States to the Soviet Union and the seeming erosion of our most basic principles in a way that has weakened our will and determination as a nation.

Modern day conservative activists are provided considerable ammunition for their opinion by a press corps composed largely of journalists whose personal philosophy and education is liberal or left-of-center on the political spectrum, by a press corps that seems to have forgotten that the First Amendment protects the freedom of speech of all citizens as well as all journalists, by professional journalism educators who speak glowingly in their professional publications of "journalism students . . . dedicated to changing society . . . and imbued with romantic visions of exposing the crimes of the most untouchable of the nation's leaders."

So it should hardly surprise anyone to attend a "how to" public relations seminar in Washington as I did recently and hear such comments as, "How can we get the media's attention?" "They don't take us seriously."

im·pri·mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things).

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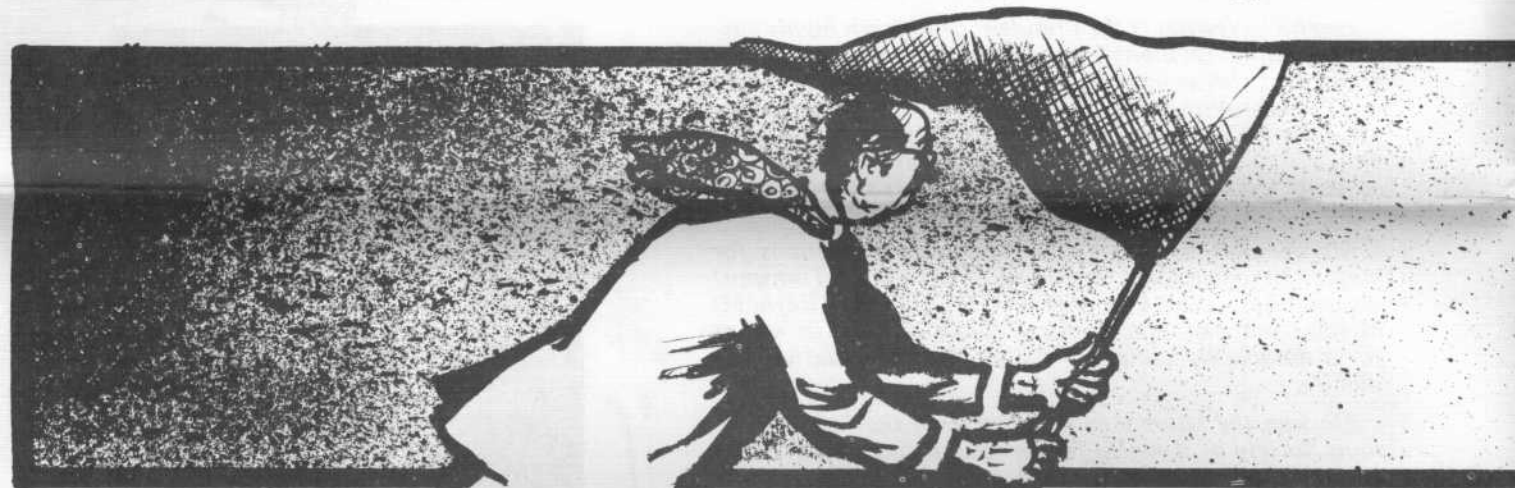
"They either ignore us, or when they attend one of our news conferences they are antagonistic." "What do you do when you hold a news conference and nobody comes -and that happens to me often?" "We really don't have enough money to compete with the 'other side' for media and public attention - particularly those big ads in the *Times* and *Washington Post* with their outrageous claims."

Now you know these questioners were public relations staffers for the American Conservative Union, Young Americans for Freedom, the National Legal Center for the Public Interest, The Hoover Institution, The American Security Council, and Accuracy in Media - right? Wrong. The groups represented at the seminar, conducted in

Disenchantment with this general philosophy began in the late 1960s and accelerated in the early 1970s as more and more Americans realized that more and bigger government wasn't the solution but the cause of many of our social and economic problems.

I think it's evident that the domestic and foreign policies of the past 50 years have left us with an economy in turmoil, our defenses down and surrounded by a hostile, envious, dangerous world and led by a President who is increasingly isolated and certainly bewildered.

Yet a closer look at the country reveals firmer and more deeply-held commitments to traditional values than have been witnessed for many years. An increasingly articulate



January by an organization called Public Interest Public Relations, included the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Zero Population Growth, The Alliance to Save Energy, The NAACP Legal Defense Fund, The Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, The National Urban Coalition, and Ralph Nader's Project for Open Government . . . .

It would seem that the title for this talk, "Selling the liberal media conservative ideas," is a bit misleading, since many "liberal" organizations have the same problems conservative groups face when dealing with "the media."

As one who has been "selling" the "liberal" media conservative ideas for more than 25 years, 15 in the zoo on the Potomac, I don't question the difficulty of selling unpopular causes to newsmen who are mostly "liberal" in their politics and philosophy. But sitting around at conferences complaining about "the media," badgering journalists about their bias and trying to harass editors into covering non-news is not the answer to the problem.

It's not the answer because it doesn't work, because yesterday's unpopular causes are becoming today's popular causes and because there has been considerable change, for the better, in the makeup of the media.

I think it's pertinent at this point to take a look at some of the change taking place. Until a few years ago most of the major institutions, the key "publics" in this country, tended to favor more and bigger government programs as the solution to most social and economic problems. Most intellectuals throughout the Western world were inclined to believe that increased governmental activity in the marketplace was the best way to improve the conditions of mankind.

message is being received in Washington from grassroots America that unlimited government and a weak foreign policy is not the answer to the challenges of the eighties. The message is being heard and echoed in academic circles and on Capitol Hill-communicated by a new breed of journalists whose numbers are growing.

At the same time the grassroots message is being translated into innovative ideas by a new breed of lawmakers, scholars and intellectuals through a growing number of conservative "think tanks." They are producing the conservative ideas that I believe will shape our society during the 80s and for decades after, just as the growth of big government in the past 40 years was directed by the lawmakers, scholars and journalists conditioned by the 30s.

As Tom Gephardt, editorial page editor of the influential Ohio daily *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, said recently, "It is no exaggeration to say that most of the innovative thoughts on government and the people's relation to it today are conservative in tone."

In a nutshell, we have now reached the point where the policies of those who have preached more and bigger government as the solution to our national problems are publically discredited.

The practical effect of that has been felt in Washington on Capitol Hill and has resulted in some significant victories for those who favor a more limited government and greater individual freedom. A specific example of that has been the failure of Congress to enact legislation creating a Consumer Protection Agency - with a great deal of credit for that victory going to a revitalized Chamber of Commerce and a business community in general that only



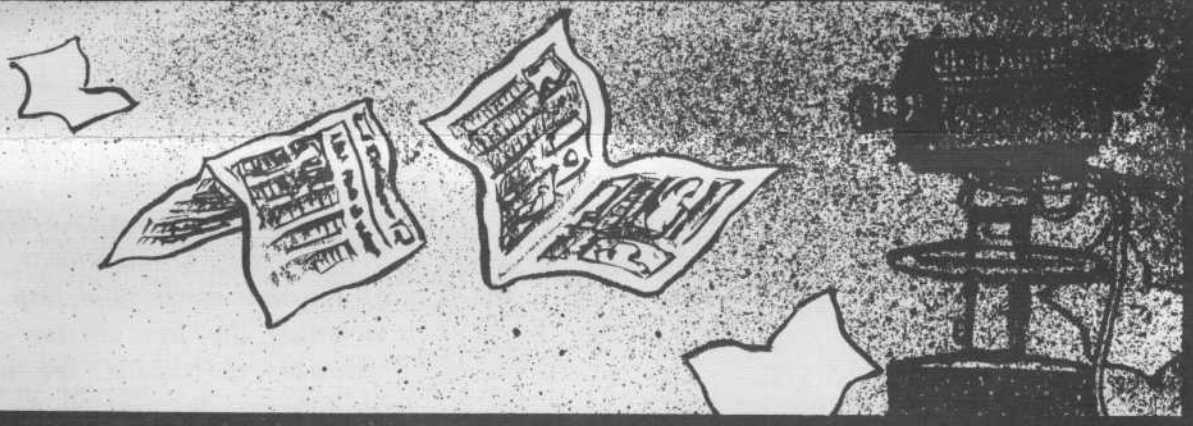
recently has come to understand that business and politics must mix.

More victories are in sight - framed by an intellectual community that is coming to realize that the "liberal" philosophy is bankrupt. It has had its chance and failed. Big government only leads to bigger problems.

This has given rise to what is commonly called, in news reports, as the "new right."

Whether it's "new" or not is a subject of considerable disagreement, even in conservative circles. What is generally agreed, however, is that conservatism today - more than at any time in recent memory - is enjoying an intellectual renaissance not only in the universities and among those

are conservative, with the field also including the likes of Stan Evans, Evans-Novak, Smith Hempstone, George Will, Ralph de Toledano, Jack Kilpatrick, Kevin Phillips, Michael Novak, Bill Safire, Nick Thimmesch, Jeffrey Hart, John Lofton, John Chamberlain, Bill Rusher, Tony Harrigan, Paul Harvey and, of course, William F. Buckley, Jr. On the hard-line liberal side what is there past Carl Rowan, Daniel Schorr, Richard Reeves, Mary McGrory and the *Times* crew? Bill Raspberry and Joe Kraft often take moderate to conservative positions, with Kraft becoming increasingly "hard line" on foreign policy. The fact is that in my travels - and I spend several days a month calling on and briefing editorial page editors of newspapers around the country - the biggest complaint I have heard is the lack of interesting young liberal writers.



who formulate policy options which serve as a basis of most of the action taken on Capitol Hill but also in journalistic and opinion-writing circles.

For example:

— A whole new generation of conservative public policy journals are taking their place alongside the long-established liberal journals. *Policy Review*, the quarterly public policy magazine of the conservative Heritage Foundation, is only two years old and has been described as "must reading for anybody interested in governmental affairs" by liberal *Philadelphia Daily News* columnist Chuck Stone; called "the conservative's answer to the *New Republic*" by Paul Greenberg, a Pulitzer-prize winning editorial writer and columnist; and been favorably reviewed by *Library Journal*, the largest and most comprehensive magazine in its field. Extracts of *Policy Review* articles have been reprinted in virtually every major daily newspaper in the U.S., including such giants of the business as *The New York Times*, *Washington Star*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Baltimore Sun* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

—While these new policy journals have been emerging and gaining acceptance, several old line intellectual publications, such as *Commentary* and *Harpers*, have also moved away from the liberal orthodoxy of government intervention and are providing conservative academics and journalists access to an opinion-thinking public that wasn't available 10 years ago.

—In the field of opinion writing, conservative syndicated columnists now dominate the field. Virtually all of the new, young and articulate spokesmen in this field, such as Joe Sobran, Bill Stein, Bob Tyrrell, and Pat Buchanan,

—In the print media, I would estimate that the 1550 daily newspapers in this country tip moderate-conservative editorially and actually very conservative on selective issues - part of the reason for the success of conservative single issue groups. It is true that the dominant newspapers in the country are liberal - *The Boston Globe*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*. But even these long-time stalwarts of the left have not only shifted on many issues but have opened their letters and op-ed pages to an increasing number of conservative intellectuals.

—At the grassroots level - those dailies with circulations under 50,000 and the 7000 or so weeklies - it is the liberal who probably has the most to complain about since these publications are overwhelmingly conservative. For example, I initiated a bi-weekly column on Right to Work 15 years ago and it now runs in more than 600 newspapers. And the weekly HERITAGE FORUM Herb Berkowitz and I started at The Heritage Foundation just two years ago is now run regularly by more than 500 large weeklies and about 150 small dailies.

—Finally at the working press level one need only look at the makeup of the press corps and the coverage. The Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Right to Work Committee and other groups get for their efforts to understand that conservative ideas and activities are not dismissed out-of-hand by a sinister and evil conspiracy of Marxists in Washington and New York.

Hopefully the balance of that Washington working press corps will be shifted further by such new and creative operations at the ACU-ERI's National Journalism Center. The NJC, started less than three years ago to train young

people in the skills of objective journalism within a framework of traditional values, has been one of the fastest-growing parts of ERI and operates three sessions annually, giving some 50 to 100 young people practical experience in the world of working journalism.

The conclusion has to be that the shift in the academic and intellectual community is now being reflected in the nation's media. Conservatism is enjoying an intellectual renaissance—in the universities, among those who formulate policy options, and in journalistic and opinion-writing circles.

And while we have a long way to go, the change in ideological climate in this country could not have happened if ABC, CBS, NBC, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek* and *Time* were not only as liberal in their thinking and actions as they are but also the sole shaper of public policy in this country.

I am not unaware of the still existing bias of these institutions, particularly in television. And I agree with Dr. Ernest Lefever of the Washington-based Ethics and Public Policy Center who wrote in the *Washington Star* the other day on "Walter Cronkite and The Way It Is," saying, "Recognizing the great but unquantifiable impact of television news and views on the course of human events, one can hope that Cronkite's successor will resist three temptations of his craft: (1) to move from newsmen to newsmaker, (2) to permit his political preferences to determine what is newsworthy, and (3) to assume that he can really tell it the way it is" —since Mr. Cronkite publically admitted in a *Playboy* interview in 1973 that most newsmen are liberal and "inclined to side with humanity rather than with authority and institutions."

One can only hope but understand that it is unlikely that the successor [Dan Rather] will resist the temptations.

At the same time this is no excuse for the conservative activist and professional public relations practitioner to give up. "*Ideas Have Consequences*" Professor Richard Weaver wrote 30 years ago. They have nothing else, if truth be told. One way or another they sway the future. There was a time in recent American history when a conservative with ideas seemed—to the intellectual and communications establishment—as improbable as a building without walls.

Not today. Today the principle ideas afloat in public discourse are conservative ideas, like tax limitation, the balanced budget, a stronger national defense to deter communist aggression.

There are various explanations for this, including those that I have mentioned and that includes a perceptible change in the media, particularly the print media. Conservative ideas are now listened to, reported on, and often editorially supported.

Obviously I believe conservatives can win public support for their positions. They can influence people. And they can convert that public support into legislative actions. They can and have. And there are basic principles to be followed in planning, developing, and conducting a public relations program in areas involving political and philosophical issues.

They are:

First, define your problem in the simplest of terms.

Second, focus your program on the heart of the problem, concentrate public attention on the principle at stake, and avoid being dragged into unproductive, tangen-

tial arguments.

Third, organize a staff that believes in what it is doing. Dedication to the cause is not a substitute for professional competence. Both are essential.

Fourth, find out where the public stands on your issue—particularly the public that will determine the success or failure of your objective.

Fifth, plan ahead.

Sixth, keep your policies simple and provide your staff strong backing.

Seventh, keep your staff "tight." I'm a firm believer that overstaffing is endemic to the profession and that a small group of highly talented, knowledgeable, conscientious, and hard working people will almost always outperform the largest staff of ordinary personnel.

Eighth, keep the program honest. Critics of public relations often refer to its practitioners as "hidden persuaders" who surreptitiously mold public opinion. In the battle for public opinion on legislation or in an election the use of "pernicious propaganda techniques"—lying to be more exact—almost always backfires.

Ninth, use your allies.

Tenth, take your case to the right people. This is where planning is most important. The issue, the timing, the circumstances and so on may necessitate a major grassroots public information program. Or your research may suggest that your target audience is reachable with a rifle-shot approach.

Eleventh, let Congress and the President, or as the case may be, state legislators and the governor, know what your group is doing and what others are saying about your issue.

As Heritage Foundation President Ed Feulner said recently, "The harsh reality is that no matter how many studies are written, no matter how well they are constructed, the effort is wasted if it fails to have an impact on the thinking of those who decide and implement policy—our lawmakers and regulators."

Finally, get to know the media and the individual newsmen and editors necessary to do your job. Is the media you need to communicate your story, radio or television, or editorial page editors or political writers or Capitol Hill reporters? Find out and keep in mind that the news person's time is at a premium—he is buried with news releases, background studies and invitations to news conferences. If you expect him to listen to you, you must make a conscious effort to gain his attention, his confidence, and his respect. And keep in mind that if you don't go that extra distance to introduce yourself to the media, to those people who you think will be interested in your materials, they are unlikely to find you on their own—there are hundreds of other sources for information.

The absolute best way to gain the attention, confidence, and respect of news people is through a combination of personal contact and by becoming the source of interesting material—intelligently prepared, accurate and useful.

Those are what I consider the guiding principles to an effective public relations program involving public opinion. Carrying the program out is another story. But fortunately there are no revolutionary tools and techniques. You can learn them from any standard public relations textbook—such things as tailoring information to specific publics, organizing citizens groups, distributing information kits,



arranging editorial seminars and briefings, writing speeches, writing and placing issue advertising and coordinating it with legislative and public relations activities, and so on. Which tools and techniques you use, and how, are determined by your objective and target audience.

Yes, times have changed, there is an intellectual renaissance. The new ideas are conservative in tone and the media is much more receptive. And still we often stumble when working on issue or legislative programs.

One reason is that far too many organizations don't understand or accept the necessity for close liaison between the public relations and governmental relations functions—lobbying. On a given issue, success is simply unlikely if you don't have a program that utilizes the coordinated effort of both.

More important is the failure of too many conservative activists to carry out the vital press relations functions. On the corporate front there is an increasing tendency of so-called public relations "professionals" to neglect the vital press relations functions. As Jack O'Dwyer, editor of a PR newsletter said recently, "The drive over the years has clearly been away from press contact . . . . When public relations men and women recognized the perils of dealing with an independent and uncontrollable press, they turned to safer havens. They want to avoid peril to their jobs from dissatisfied bosses. The safer havens they sought were responsibility for dealing with captive audiences such as employees, customers, suppliers and plant communities." Yet, O'Dwyer adds, "Nothing is more important than dealing with the media. Many corporate PR people today don't do it, and in fact, don't want to do it because penetrating and embarrassing coverage may result when they do."

Harsh words. But from my experience around Washington, true. The only thing I can think of to say to temper O'Dwyer's opinion is that many corporate public relations directors and their staffs are so trade and financial-press oriented that they simply are unfamiliar with the tools and techniques basic to an effective public relations program involving large-scale public opinion, let alone the newsmen and media they need to know to do their job.

On the Washington scene the neglect of vital press rela-

tions functions by conservative activists is, in my opinion, a key factor in the failures they have at selling "the liberal media on conservative ideas." Coming in at 10 a.m., sending a news release out in the mail "bulk rate" addressed to "Editor," taking a two-hour lunch to go listen to a conservative Congressman complain about his latest communications failure, returning to the office to tell a secretary to call "the media" up and make sure they attend your press conference, and leaving at 4 p.m. to meet the guys and spend two hours complaining about "the media" is not "selling conservative ideas to the liberal media." It is why some conservatives, too many conservatives in fact, don't. What more conservatives need to do is as UPI Washington Bureau Chief Grant Dillman told me the other day to "work with rather than work over the media." And so we come to the nub of the problem: the need to have an intellectual renaissance in our dealings with the American media.

It's 1980 and the American people are sending a message about big government; a new breed of lawmaker, scholar, and intellectual is translating the message into innovative ideas; there has been an intellectual renaissance in the universities and there has been a significant change in the attitude toward conservative ideas in journalistic and opinion-writing circles. Yet an awareness of all this change doesn't seem to be evident in the way conservatives handle media relations and their overall public relations programs. Too many conservative activists and public relations practitioners are still sitting around at conservative seminars complaining about the "liberal media" when the opportunity to communicate has never been better.

There is little question that the impact of government on every aspect of their daily lives has made more and more Americans understand and want to know what is going on in Washington, their state capitol and so on. That information is available from a growing body of conservative legislators, academics and scholars. But a bridge needs to be built between the two groups. Aristotle said it centuries ago and it's still true today - the environment is complex and man's political capacity is simple, but if conservative communicators will understand their function and know their job, then they can serve as the bridge, and the outlook for conservative ideas to shape America's domestic and foreign policies will be bright indeed.

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